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SUBJECT: INDEPENDENT POLLS FALL UNDER GOB CONTROL

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On November 12, the GOB announced that all independent polling institutions must receive accreditation by a special panel of the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences. The resolution enumerates several requirements the pollsters must meet in order to receive accreditation, which the BNAS can take away at any time. Although the GOB insists that BNAS' control over independent polling institutions will ensure quality, this regulation is another example of the GOB's efforts to control access to independent information. End Summary.
We'll Take Over From Here

¶2. (U) On November 12, the Belarusian Council of Ministers adopted a resolution stating any institution wishing to conduct and publish public opinion polls on issues such as countrywide referendums, presidential and parliamentary elections, or the political situation in Belarus must first receive accreditation from a special panel of the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences (BNAS). The resolution gives BNAS the authority to monitor the activities of the polling institutions and to revoke accreditation at any point if it finds irregularities in activities or if the released poll contains biases or is unreliable.

¶3. (U) GOB officials claim this resolution will ensure polling quality standards, especially in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections. They reasoned the number of polls will increase during the election campaigns. In order for polls to accurately reflect the situation in Belarus, the polling institutions need a certain level of expertise. In addition, Central Election Commission Chairwoman Lidiya Yarmoshina praised the resolution as a method of stamping out surveys aimed at "manipulating public sentiments."

Requirements for Accreditation

¶4. (U) Central Election Committee Secretary Nikolai Lozovik noted that applicants wishing to conduct polls must meet "quite simple requirements." For a pollster to be considered for accreditation, it must employ two polling experts and two labor or civil issues specialists, all of whom must have at least three years of work experience and degrees in sociology or political science. The applicant must apply in writing to the BNAS in advance of conducting the poll. The application must clearly state the

purpose and timeframe of the poll in addition to who funded and who requested it. BNAS will make a decision on the application within fifteen days of receipt. If the results of the poll are to appear in the press, the polling institution must submit to the BNAS all information about the poll, including the interviewing methods used, the list of questions asked, and explanations of the verification procedures employed. If the published poll contains any distortion of facts or suggests violations of the law, BNAS can demand that the institute publish the correct findings within two weeks. The resolution gives BNAS the authority to revoke accreditation at any point if it finds irregularities in activities or if the released poll contains biases or is unreliable.

Independent Pollsters Express Their Concern

¶5. (C) On November 18, Poloff met with the director of the NOVAK Research and Polling Organization, Andrey Vardomatskiy, to discuss the effects of the regulation on the two main independent polling institutions in Belarus. Vardomatskiy stated that even if the GOB enforced the regulation, it would still be ineffective since it is possible to conduct polls in Belarus from abroad. He also considered the GOB's regulation to be a clear signal to the rest of the world that the election will be neither free nor fair.

¶6. (C) Vardomatskiy, however, did express some concerns about the potential impact the regulation could have on polling in Belarus and proposed a method to combat the effect. He suggested having several international polling institutions apply for accreditation. Once they receive accreditation, they would employ NOVAK secretly as a subcontractor. In addition, Vardomatskiy was apprehensive about the BNAS' ability to demand access to the pollsters' verification procedures since NOVAK then would not be able to protect the anonymity of its participants. GOB access to participants' personal information and responses could lead to increased hesitancy of people who do not support the state to participate in polls or could also affect the veracity of participants' answers.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) The GOB issued a similar edict to control polling after the 2001 presidential elections, but never fully implemented it. With the impending 2006 presidential elections, the GOB is taking more seriously the manipulation of public opinion and limitations on information access. This edict will also likely be used to block exit polling and tracking polling to keep accurate popularity figures from being made public. The GOB will most likely use its control over the polling institutions as a means to declare that the 2006 presidential elections were free and fair; government control over public opinion reporting is a clear signal that the authorities have no intention of conducting a free, fair democratic election.

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